



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# News Release

Pacific Islands External Affairs Office

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## Plant Critical Habitat Designated in Northwestern Hawaiian Islands

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today designated critical habitat for five Hawaiian plant species on three northwestern Hawaiian islands as part of its ongoing effort to comply with a federal court order. All three islands – Nihoa, Necker, and Laysan – are federal lands within the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge. Managed by the Fish and Wildlife Service, access to these remote islands is by permit only.

Three of the plant species – *Amaranthus brownii*, *Pritchardia remota* or loulu, and *Schiedea verticillata* – are found only on the northwestern Hawaiian islands. The other two – *Mariscus pennatifolius* and *Sesbania tomentosa* – are also found on one or more of the main Hawaiian islands.

“Just as was the case with the main Hawaiian Islands, we were required to consider critical habitat for the six endangered plant species that were found in the northwestern Hawaiian islands,” said Dave Allen, Pacific regional director for the agency. “Our efforts in the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge are already aimed toward protecting and recovering endangered species.”

The five plants and their habitat have been affected or are currently threatened by one or more of the following factors: competition for space, light, water, and nutrients by nonnative plants; predation by mice and nonnative insects; fire; human disturbance; and an increased likelihood of extinction or harm from naturally occurring events such as winter storms.

In keeping with critical habitat final rules, existing structures and features within a designated critical habitat area do not contain the elements required by these plant species and are excluded from critical habitat. Accordingly, the field camp on the island of Laysan was not included; nor were grave sites, places of worship, and other sites of cultural and historic importance to native Hawaiians on the islands of Nihoa and Necker.

All beach areas, sand spits, and islets in the northwestern Hawaiian islands (except for Sand Island in Midway Atoll) are already designated as critical habitat for the Hawaiian monk seal. The designated plant critical habitat includes all portions of the three islands other than manmade features.

*Amaranthus brownii* is an annual herb found only on the island of Nihoa. Although no plants have been seen since 1983, their normal growing season is during the winter, when seasonal

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storms make landing on the island almost impossible. In 1983, approximately 35 plants in four colonies were found on the island.

*Pritchardia remota*, one of the palm or loulu species native to Hawaii, grows in four colonies on Nihoa Island and may have historically occurred on Laysan Island. Both islands are included in its critical habitat. It is now being reintroduced on Laysan Island.

*Schiedea verticillata* is a short-lived perennial herb found only on Nihoa Island. In 1996, about 360 plants were counted in ten colonies. During the dry season, it dies back to an enlarged root.

Although other subspecies of *Mariscus pennatiformis* are found on the main Hawaiian islands, *Mariscus pennatiformis* ssp. *bryanii* only exists on Laysan Island. The species is being propagated in the island's greenhouse, and about 200 plants are now growing on the island. Threats to the subspecies include seed predation by the endangered Laysan finch and burrowing activities of nesting seabirds.

*Sesbania tomentosa* or 'ohai is found on at least six main Hawaiian islands and on the islands of Nihoa and Necker. On Nihoa, which receives more rainfall than Necker, several thousand plants were seen in 1999.

Critical habitat for a sixth species, *Cenchrus agrimonioides* var. *laysanensis* or kamanomano, was considered but not designated. The species disappeared from Laysan Island before 1923, from Midway Atoll sometime shortly after 1902, and was last seen on Kure Atoll in about 1980. Despite periodic surveys on all the islands during the past 20 years, no plants have been found and no viable genetic material of this variety is known to exist. The Fish and Wildlife Service believes it unlikely that the plant will be rediscovered.

The proposed rule to establish critical habitat for these plants was published on May 14, 2002, and a notice of availability for a draft economic analysis was published on Sept. 12, 2002. Thirteen comments were received regarding the proposed rule; no comments were received on the economic analysis. Only minor changes were made in the final rule. The potential economic effects are estimated at approximately \$30,800.

The final rule designating critical habitat for these five plant species was published in today's *Federal Register*. It becomes effective in 30 days. It is available at the Fish and Wildlife Service Web site at <http://pacificislands.fws.gov>. Copies of the rule may also be obtained by calling the Service's Honolulu office at 808/541 3441.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses 540 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices, and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.